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RUEHSH/AMCONSUL SHENYANG 0204
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0195
RUEHHK/AMCONSUL HONG KONG 0266
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI 0190
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 GUANGZHOU 000534

SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: Senior Citizens Seize, Hold Suspect Wastewater Plant to
Preserve "Evidence of Pollution"

REF A: BEIJING 2548; REF B: BEIJING 2121

GUANGZHOU 00000534 001.2 OF 003

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¶1. (U) Summary: Residents of villages neighboring a controversial wastewater treatment facility near Quanzhou, Fujian Province, expelled workers and occupied the plant August 26 in protest of government claims that the plant's discharges were safe and that the local water source was unaffected by pollutants. An estimated 10,000 villagers clashed with police and detained two local officials August 31 after one of the officials physically assaulted a female villager near the plant. The police pulled back and the officials were released the following day. Since the incident, elderly villagers have continued to occupy the wastewater facility, and there has been no regular contact between the villagers and the government. Residents are hopeful that high-level government authorities might resolve the situation, but have said they would respond forcefully if police attempt to retake the facility by force. Congenoff met with villagers near the site on September 5 to hear their story and encourage a peaceful resolution to the standoff. End summary.

Pollution Concerns and Cover-up: "Preserving the Evidence"

¶2. (SBU) Though they could not agree on the precise date, villagers involved in the incident told Congenoff during his visit to the area near the village on September 5 that representatives from the local environmental protection bureau (EPB) visited Houshan Village in Fengwei Township in Fujian around August 20, apparently in response to complaints about noxious fumes emanating from a water treatment plant. Houshan residents claim that their village suffers uncommonly high rates of cancer and other illness, which they attribute to poorly treated or untreated discharges from a nearby tannery and other industry. When EPB officials returned August 26 to examine the water at the plant, villagers were told that the water was harmless and that the discharges met environmental standards. The officials also suggested that the wastewater would not pose any threat to the villagers' health and that it was safe to

be discharged directly into the sea, according to Houshan residents.

The villagers, suspecting corrupt motives behind the officials' unwillingness to address the pollution problems, told us they then became angry and decided to occupy the plant. They forced the plant workers to leave and have occupied the plant since August 26.

¶13. (SBU) According to the villagers, when local officials returned to the wastewater treatment plant August 31, the villagers expected them to discuss the case and seek an acceptable resolution.

Instead, the officials planned only to discharge the wastewater directly into the sea and subsequently rinse the holding tanks with clean water, said the villagers, who opposed the plan. The villagers suspected that the local officials hoped to eliminate evidence of the extent and type of pollution causing sickness and discomfort in the nearby villages.

Problem Escalates From Confrontation to Minor Riot

¶14. (SBU) Estimates differ on the number of villagers who confronted approximately 2,000 police August 31, but media report at least 10,000 and the villagers themselves claim as many as 20,000, noting that people came from several nearby villages to participate. According to the Houshan villagers, the confrontation began when the township's deputy party secretary hit or slapped a woman outside the plant and then attempted to flee by car. Several villagers prevented his escape, after which the official exited his vehicle and punched a villager blocking his way, according to the villagers, who said the angry crowd then destroyed the official's car. The official and a colleague were detained by the villagers.

¶15. (SBU) When riot police arrived and fired tear gas into the crowd of protestors, villagers responded by throwing stones. The villagers claim that, not having heard gunshots before, they did not initially realize that police were using non-lethal means against

GUANGZHOU 00000534 002.2 OF 003

them. Believing they were under attack from firearms, the villagers began to panic and then responded using force, according to the villagers. Only minor injuries were sustained during the confrontation, during which the police withdrew.

Police Withdraw After Scuffle; Calm Ensues; Stand-off Continues

¶16. (SBU) The plant is now "guarded" by elderly volunteers -- mainly women -- to prevent officials from entering. According to the villagers, these efforts are truly grassroots; there is not even anybody organizing the coverage by the volunteers. There have been no police at the water treatment facility since the August 31 incident, though residents claim there is a plainclothes police presence in their village. Officials, according to the villagers, have fled the village in fear of being beaten or otherwise assaulted. On September 9 a villager told Congenoff by telephone that although the village remains calm, village residents are becoming increasingly angry that officials -- at any level -- appear unwilling to engage in discussing solutions to the problem. The villagers are considering filling the wastewater holding tanks with soil, hoping the soil will absorb the polluted wastes and reduce the stench. The villagers claim to have closed all of the pipes through which wastewater enters and exits the facility. The villagers say they will not allow the government to restart the plant, and that if police attempt to retake the plant by force the villagers will respond likewise.

Villagers: No Abuse of Officials

¶17. (SBU) Villagers disputed Xinhua reports of abuse against the two officials seized during the August 31 riots and later released. They told Congenoff that not only was violence not used against the officials, but that they were provided water and a bed during their detention. Moreover, it was decided to release the officials at 04:00 the next morning because some villagers worried that if the officials were released during the day their personal safety could not be guaranteed if angry villagers learned of their presence.

No Communication with the Government

¶18. (U) Apart from a hope that unspecified "higher authorities" will step in to handle the situation, Houshan villagers do not have a plan to resolve the standoff. As of September 5, the villagers had no regular communication with authorities. When asked what message they would like to convey to the government, they answered, "We have no intention of harming anyone, including government officials, because we love this country. A handful of government officials ignore the needs of the community. These officials are greedy and corrupt." To resolve the situation, either the treatment plant has to move or the government must provide new residential areas away from the pollution, said the villagers, who also claimed not to fear retribution from local officials.

¶19. (SBU) Villagers seemed hopeful that a September 4 visit by a couple of individuals claiming to be from the Ministry of Environmental Protection's East China Environmental Inspection and Assessment Center would prove a positive development. These individuals, whose visit was arranged through the village's Senior Citizens' Association, took samples from the plant for analysis, the villagers said. Villagers later told Congenoff by phone that they were looking into the possibility of having a Fuzhou-based environmental NGO visit to take samples, thus providing third-party confirmation.

Some Media Attention

¶10. (SBU) Hong Kong-based journalists from NHK recently filmed extensively at the treatment facility, according to the villagers. Local print and television journalists, too, have visited, but have yet to report on the incident, except for a September 2 article in Xinhua. Reuters has reported the August 31 incident, as have

GUANGZHOU 00000534 003.2 OF 003

several regional websites generally critical of the Chinese Government. Contributors to one Fujian-focused local Chinese-language Internet message board called for high-level government involvement to solve the stalemate, though one contributor pessimistically characterized the entire wastewater incident as par for the course in a "river crab society" -- a pejorative homophone of China's "Harmonious Society" campaign.

Situation Stalemated, Villagers Prepared For Long Haul;
USG Attention Appreciated

¶11. (SBU) Comment: Villagers, it seems, have completely lost confidence in government at virtually all levels. They lack communications lines with government so re-establishing trust and finding a solution will be difficult. They are hunkered down for the long haul, with elderly citizens ready to wait it out with no intention of backing down. The villagers appreciated Congenoff's visit, and, no doubt, provincial and local officials are by now aware of the visit. We have no current plans for any further actions by the Consulate, but we will continue to monitor this situation and report any developments. End Comment.

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